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## THACKERAY STUDIES



# THACKERAY STUDIES

BY

A. J. ROMILLY

“He certainly is of a satirical turn, but then he  
is only bitter against mean persons and things.”

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WILLIAM MAKEPEACE  
THACKERAY



WILLIAM MAKEPEACE  
THACKERAY

December 24, 1863.

He was a cynic : by his life all wrought  
Of generous acts, mild words and  
gentle ways ;

His heart wide open to all kindly thought,  
His hand so quick to give, his tongue  
to praise.

He was a cynic ; you might read it writ  
In that broad brow crowned with its  
silver hair ;

In those blue eyes with childlike candour lit ;

In the sweet smile his lips were wont  
to wear.

## **William Makepeace Thackeray**

He was a cynic : by the love that clung  
About him, from his children, friends  
and kin ;  
By the sharp pain light pen and gossip  
tongue  
Wrought in him, chafing the soft  
heart within.

He was a cynic : let his books confess :  
His DOBBIN'S silent love ; or, yet more  
rare,  
His NEWCOME'S chivalry and simpleness,  
His LITTLE SISTER'S life of loving  
care.

And if his acts, affections, works and  
ways  
Stamp not upon the man the cynic's  
sneer  
From life to death, oh, public, turn your  
gaze—  
The last scene of a “cynical” career.

## **William Makepeace Thackeray**

Those uninvited crowds, this hush that  
lies

Unbroken till the solemn words of  
prayer

From many hundred reverent voices rise  
Into the sunny stillness of the air.

These tears, in eyes but little used to  
tears ;

These sobs from manly lips, hard set  
and grim :

Of friends, to whom his life lay bare for  
years ;

Of strangers, who but knew his books,  
not him.

A cynic ?—yes, if 'tis the cynic's part

To track the serpent's trail with sad-  
dened eye ;

To mark how good and ill divide the  
heart,

How lives in chequered shade and  
sunshine lie.

## **William Makepeace Thackeray**

How e'en the best unto the worst is knit,  
By brotherhood of weakness, sin, and  
care ;

How even in the worst, sparks may be  
lit

To show all is not utter darkness there.

Through vanity's bright flaunting fair he  
walked,

Marking the puppets dance, the jugg-  
glers play ;

Saw virtue tripping, honest effort baulked,  
And sharpened wit on roguery's  
downward way.

And told us what he saw : and if he  
smiled,

His smile had more of sadness than  
of mirth,—

But more of love than either—undefiled,  
Gentle alike by accident of birth,

## **William Makepeace Thackeray**

And gift of courtesy, and grace of love.

When shall his friends find such  
another friend ?

For them, and for his children, God  
above

Has comfort ; let us bow : God knows  
the end.

*These lines by Tom Taylor are reprinted from "Punch,"  
January 9, 1864.*





## BECKY SHARI :

### A CHARACTER STUDY

WE live in an age of centenaries. The early decades of the nineteenth century were so richly productive of great men, in art, literature, science, politics or economics, that almost every year as it comes can boast of some name or group of names which we are glad to honour.

It is noteworthy that while preparations are already being made on an extensive scale for the adequate celebration of the Dickens Centenary, which does not fall till next year, comparatively little notice has been taken of the centenary of Dickens' great contempor-

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ary, which fell last July. It is not, however, surprising. Dickens will always appeal to a wider circle than Thackeray. No one can fail to recognize his cheeriness, his optimism, his exuberant bonhomie. He leaves us on good terms with ourselves and with human nature; he fascinates us with the wealth of his originality, and, defying criticism, he carries us away, in spite of ourselves, to a world peopled with the brilliant creations of his own genius—a world in which the most impossible events awaken no sense of incongruity, and in which ordinary standards of conduct and convention seem ridiculously out of place. Thackeray will never achieve the popularity enjoyed by Dickens. He appeals to a more restricted class. Really to know and love him demands close reading and careful study. It takes a subtle sense of humour fully to appreciate the

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delicacy of his satire, and a keen ear for language fully to enjoy the beauty of his style ; and when we have penetrated beneath the surface of exquisite style, we must be prepared for unflattering home truths, for stern denunciation of "pleasant vices," for uncompromising exposure of comfortable self-deceptions, which bruise our self-esteem and leave us with an uneasy feeling that we are not all that we might be, and certainly no whit better than our neighbours—which may be wholesome, but is not soothing to one's *amour propre*.

As a story-teller, Dickens must rank above Thackeray. He shows far more skill in working his interest up to a dramatic (too often a theatrical) climax, and in keeping details and side-issues duly subordinated to the main plot. It is as a master of character that Thackeray stands alone. With all their brilliance

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and originality, Dickens' characters are more or less impersonations with little or no development. He manipulates them from outside, and rewards them according to their deserts with a fine sense of poetic justice. Thackeray creates his characters, and seems to leave them to their own development. The interest in his novels centres, not on episode, but on the study of men and women working out their own salvation and their own doom—now "masters of their fate," now the creatures of circumstance, but always intensely human, awakening our sympathy because they are so human.

✓ No better illustration could be found of his powers of characterization than Becky Sharp, a woman who, in the hands of a poorer writer, must have degenerated into a monstrosity, but who under his treatment never loses her humanity, never becomes stagey or

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grotesque, but stands before us, an eloquent sermon on the possibilities of evil latent in human nature, but requiring certain conditions, and also choice and co-operation, to develop as they do in the protagonist of "Vanity Fair."

Thackeray is too true to nature to leave us to suppose that Becky Sharp represents an ordinary type of womanhood. He is therefore at some pains to emphasize her parentage—a drunken artist, from whom she inherited her brilliant mental powers, her artistic temperament and her sensuousness, her love of all forms of excitement and enjoyment, and her reckless capacity for debt; and a French opera-girl of some education, who had endowed her daughter with the wit, gaiety, vivacity and dramatic talent that stood her in such good stead in her battle with the world. Her equipment was exclusively intellectual. She represents a type

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common enough at the time of the Renaissance, especially in the South of Europe, where the keenest intellectual development might be met accompanied by moral atrophy, producing characters not so much *immoral* as *unmoral*, devoid of spiritual perceptions, and dead to all sense of right and wrong.

If heredity began the evil work in Becky Sharp, environment did little to correct it. There was everything to foster the worst in her, and to stunt and blight the best. Her childhood knew no softening influences; it left her no sacred associations to carry through life. Her home was sordid. Her father, "when drunk, used to beat his wife and daughter." By fifteen she had "all the dismal precocity of poverty." The skill with which she settled Rawdon Crawley's creditors, and in later years cajoled such sums out of Lord Steyne, was

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acquired by practice on the duns who hung about her father's door. The society with which she was thrown fostered her precocity, stimulated her wit, and destroyed any remnants of childish innocence that might have survived her miserable upbringing. With such surroundings, it was impossible that she should have any reverence left. Her keen sense of humour degenerated into cynicism, and when she entered on her career at Miss Pinkerton's she found herself intellectually head and shoulders above those with whom her lot was thrown, but morally far below the youngest child. Only acquainted with the seamy side of life, she had lost all faith in human nature, and it must in justice be admitted that her early experiences were too often confirmed, and that society at Chiswick Mall was very much less amusing and very little less selfish



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than that with which her father had thrown her. Just as the defensive weapons of an animal constantly exposed to attack become abnormally developed, so Becky's defensive weapon of wit developed till it threatened the dignity of Miss Pinkerton herself, and she was driven out to carve out her fortunes in the world on the other side of the great iron gates.

So, when Amelia Sedley is entering on life, a rich stockbroker's petted daughter, poor in intellectual gifts, but rich in love, and, as later events show, a dogged power of endurance and submission to the claims of duty little short of heroic, Rebecca Sharp starts on her career with nothing but her own wits, courage, and self-reliance to help her. It has been seen how careful Thackeray is to account for her as we first find her, even to the detail of her French ancestry;

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it remains to be seen how she develops and degenerates into the moral wreck we find her at Pumpnickel. Through life she is animated by extraordinary singleness of purpose. No side-path, however alluring, draws her from the goal in view—her own social advancement. To attain that goal she made use of everyone that crossed her path. Possessing an extraordinary bluntness of sensibility, ignoring slights, snubs, even insults, when it served her purpose to do so, she often succeeded by sheer pertinacity, where another, more sensitive and less determined, would have given up. When Sir Pitt addressed her at the dinner-table as “Ahem . . . Rebecca !” he was admitting her at last into the inner circle of a family every member of which had combined to insult her, but the position had been won by undaunted and brazen impudence.

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Indeed, one of her strongest weapons was this power of ignoring defeat. She knew how to meet insult with a disarming humility that left her assailant speechless. She was generally the first meekly to remind people that she "had been a governess." She could calculate to a nicety the impression that a certain line of conduct would produce, and fully recognize the importance of propitiating everyone. Hence her demeanour to the servants at the Sedleys', calling black Sambo "Sir," and apologizing profusely for all the trouble she gave. Hence the pains which she took to win the heart of the crushed Miss Briggs. She began by gliding into a household, gently deprecating notice; it was not till she was safely ensconced that she made herself felt. Even after showing a glimpse of her real nature, she could explain and justify herself. An ordinary woman

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would have offended George Osborne past reconciliation in that interview in Miss Crawley's drawing-room, when she ridiculed him, humbled him, and extorted from him the admission that he did not know the name of his own grandfather. Rebecca, next time she meets him and finds he may be of use, anticipates any rancour he may be about to show by so ingenuous an apology for her "pertness," and so charming an entreaty to be forgiven for an exhibition which she ascribes solely to jealousy on Amelia's behalf, "that Osborne could not but accept what was so frankly tendered, and became her slave from that moment." When she found her husband hurt by her vivacity on the eve of his march against the French, she saw it was time "to put on a demure face. 'Dearest love, do you suppose I feel nothing?' and hastily dashing something from her

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eyes, she looked up in her husband's face with a smile."

Only once does she lose her presence of mind, the occasion being that crisis of her life when she found that, had she waited three weeks, she might have been Lady Crawley, mistress of Queen's Crawley, instead of wife to the younger son ; but even then she recovered in time to lay her plans. The one time that her judgment was in fault was in connection with Miss Crawley—the only woman who was a match for her. She missed the "psychical moment" for her confession ; and *what* possessed her to correct Rawdon's spelling when he wrote to his aunt ?

She could always adapt herself to her surroundings. In her father's sordid lodgings, at Queen's Crawley, at Brighton, at Waterloo, in Mayfair, at Gaunt House, at Pumpnickel, she always played the

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rôle expected of her. The girl who began life among Bohemians, hearing talk "often but ill-suited for a girl to hear," "catches the jargon of a crack cavalry regiment," and, later, "talked about great people as if she had the fee simple of Mayfair." The dramatic instinct inherited from her mother stood her in good stead. So consummate an actress does she prove that at some time or other she deceives everyone she meets, except the few (and here Thackeray's subtle insight is shown) whose instincts are too true and hearts too pure to be dazzled by her false fires. William Dobbin, Lady Jane Crawley, and little Rawdon, saw through her. "Dobbin was so honest that her arts and cajoleries did not affect him, and he shrank from her with instinctive repulsion." Lady Jane, usually so gentle, recognized her as "a wicked woman, a

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heartless mother, a false wife," while little Rawdon "awoke a by no means pleasant look in Becky's eyes" by his blunt reception of her parade of affection : " You never kiss me at home, mamma."

Her relations with her only child reveal the innate evil of her nature, and show how far beneath her husband she is, scoundrel and roué though he might be. Becky was incapable of any unselfish feeling. Even for her child she had only indifference, which, as he unconsciously crossed her path, merged into positive dislike. He was ready to love her, but " Oh, poor lonely little benighted boy ! Mother is a name for God in the lips and hearts of little children, and here was one worshipping a stone !" The initial letter to Chapter LIII. of the original edition shows how important a part Thackeray meant the child to play at the great crisis of his

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parents' lives. The woman, cynical, dead to love herself and incapable of believing in it in others, goes on her way alone; the man, shame-faced and hesitating, takes the child's hand, to follow where he leads. If we accept Browning's test, that

"a loving worm within the clod  
Were diviner than a loveless God  
Amid His worlds, I will dare to say,"

then there is more hope for Rawdon Crawley, with all his evil past, with all his vices and sins, than for her, because in him the "sole spark of God's life" was not wholly extinguished; he was capable of responding to the love of a little child, and aspiring to something better than his degraded, vicious life for his boy's sake. "'Oh,' he said in his rude, artless way'" (to Lady Jane), "'you don't know how I'm changed



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since I knew you and—and little Rawdy—I'd—I'd—like to change somehow—you see I want—I want——'” But, as Becky warned her husband, she had “no taste for bread-and-butter,” any more, indeed, than (to quote Lord Steyne's repartee) “has a certain personage for holy water.”

As time goes on, Becky proves herself passionless, incapable of love, incapable even of an honest hatred. Again we recognize the worst development of the Renaissance type, which would poison a guest or eat with a brother's murderer—a type in which all passions seemed distilled into a cold, calculating intellectuality. Occasionally she gratifies spite, as when she taunted Lady Bareacres sitting in her horseless carriage in the *porte-cochère* of the hotel in Brussels (and how admirably Thackeray makes the little adventuress

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expose her innate vulgarity as she shouts her gibes in a shrill, mocking voice from her bedroom window, in hearing of "the landlord, the servants, and the guests, and the innumerable stragglers about the courtyard"); but, generally speaking, she bears no rancour, pockets every insult, and pursues her way untouched by love, hatred, or any motive except that of self-interest.

After the great crisis of her career is over, all the sordidness of her character comes out. For a time she drops even the mask of respectability, and we find her haunting foreign courts with men of the shadiest reputation, frequenting gaming-houses, drinking with "*Bürschen*," and, finally, dogging Jos. Sedley to death, for the sake of his insurance money—indeed, it is left a very open question whether she waited for his death or actually hastened it. It is

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impossible to conceive a degradation more revolting or complete, and yet, when the wheel turns and she finds herself once more possessed of a competence, she returns to the more decorous quarters of Vanity Fair, lives down her reputation, and we leave her busy "in works of piety," a conspicuous attendant at church, with her name in all the charity lists, and last hear of her from Clive Newcome as "her who wrote the hymns."

It is a terrible study of depravity—the more terrible because it is so possible. There is, amid all her cynicism, her recklessness, her vice, something that compels an unwilling admiration. She had good qualities, which might have developed had not every faculty been warped and distorted by selfishness and cynicism. Her courage was undeniable, but it degenerated into impudence. The

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diplomacy with which she wheedled and propitiated all with whom she came in contact might have developed into a graceful and delicate tact, but, instead, it degenerated into duplicity. She was good-natured, but her selfish absorption in her own advancement made her show kindness only where it would pay to do so. Indeed, in bringing Amelia and Dobbin together, she does, at the end of her history, do a good-natured act from which no personal advantage was to be gained. But for these stunted possibilities of better things, she would have been superhumanly evil. Thackeray was too true to nature to make her so. As she stands, taking into account her heredity and upbringing, she is a terrible picture of what a woman may become, with brilliant intellectual gifts, but no moral ideals ; with no belief in goodness in heaven or earth ; with a sneer for the

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most sacred relationships and the most holy associations ; without faith, without hope, without love, false to the core, “unsurpassable in lies,” and dead to any softening or ennobling influence. The adjective that Thackeray constantly applies to her is strikingly applicable. She passes through life a “baleful” influence, in the presence of which everything assumed a false colouring. Amelia shrank into nothing before her. Lady Jane’s stories to the children were silenced when she entered the room. Her *beauté du diable*, her brilliant satire, her keen wit and powers of caricature, fascinated all who were not rendered proof against her wiles by such singleness of heart as Dobbin’s or Lady Jane’s ; but she poisoned the atmosphere that she breathed, and exerted an evil influence over all who fell under her

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spell. We have no more powerful sermon in English literature than that preached by Becky Sharp no sterner warning than that which she gives of the consequences of a life without ideals spent in the pursuit of worldly ends. It may seem far-fetched to trace any analogy between her and Falstaff, yet, dissimilar as they are in every other respect, they afford a striking parallel in their dead materialism and loss of spiritual faculties, forfeited for lack of use. Becky might have subscribed to every detail of the knight's cynical appreciation of honour and moral ideals : "What is honour? A word. What is in that word 'honour'? Air—a trim reckoning. Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. 'Tis insensible, then? Yea—to the dead. But will it not live with the

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living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon, and so ends my catechism" (I *Henry IV.*, V. 1).

## THACKERAY'S CRITICISM OF LIFE

THOUGH it is a recognized axiom that a critic has no business to allow an author's private history, however pathetic or even tragic it may be, to bias his verdict on his literary work, it is no less true that his circumstances, so far as they affected his outlook on the world, his relation to his fellow-men, and his criticism of life, must be taken into account before any just appreciation of his work can be made.

In studying Thackeray, it is therefore necessary to keep in mind his peculiar circumstances: his character—warmly affectionate, but heavily handicapped by



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constitutional melancholy and the keen sensibility of the artist; and his life-story, his unsuccessful and disheartening ventures, his unfortunate speculations, the long time he had to wait for the appreciation that was his due, and the tragedy of his home life, which left him worse than a widower.

“*Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*”—not that one would for a moment assume the rôle of apologist for Thackeray's criticism of life. He needs none. He looked out on life, and recorded what he saw faithfully and unflinchingly. He saw simple, unobtrusive worth jostled aside as vulgar pretension pushed its way to the front; he saw men and women ready to sacrifice all for wealth or social advancement. He saw characters that might have been noble warped by ignoble ambitions, till his heart was hot within him, and he poured

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out his pent-up indignation, scourging the pettinesses, meannesses, and vices of society, not as a misanthrope who loves to expose human degradation and misery, but as the truest philanthropist, who resents the diseases and deformities that ruin men's souls, recognizing sin to be, not a part of man's nature, but a disease from without.

Experience did little to correct Thackeray's natural tendency to melancholy, and his outlook on life is a sad one. It was not enough for him to see men surrounded by creature comforts, content, while their minds and hearts were starved. He takes us to households rich in everything that money can provide—to "the Begum's" establishment in Grosvenor Square, to Sir Brian Newcome's great house in Hyde Park, to Hobson Newcome's mansion in Bryanston Square, and each one is made a sermon on the

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same text, each one illustrates the folly of labouring "for that which satisfieth not," and the hollowness of social success when made an end in itself.

The same thought underlies all his work. Look at *Beatrice Esmond*, the brilliant fiancée of the Duke of Marlborough, and look at the Baroness Bernstein. Look at Miss Crawley, rich, witty, pleasure-loving, and look at her again on her sick bed, when her illness "was aggravated by the most dreadful terrors of death, and an utter cowardice took possession of the prostrate old sinner." What sterner illustrations could he give of the truth that "as a man sows, so also shall he reap"?

Except in "*The Great Hoggarty Diamond*," Thackeray never holds up poverty in itself as a subject for pity. Generally speaking, he uses it to bring out a man's better qualities. At the

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height of his prosperity even Colonel Newcome is something less than himself, and his childlike simplicity slightly obscured, to return in its unsullied purity in the Greyfriars, when the broken-down old brother, "whose heart was as that of a little child, answered to his name, and stood in the presence of the Master." Penury is to Thackeray as nothing compared with poverty of mind and heart; he recognizes that physical privations are far less deadly than the starvation of the spiritual faculties; that "we live by admiration, hope, and love," and that where these are lacking there must be a living death.

But materialism was not the only disease which he saw undermining society. Another no less deadly evil which he attacks ruthlessly is unreality. He hated shams of every sort, and, like Ruskin, resented any form of falsehood,

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as "soot from the bottomless pit." Everything he wrote was a protest against false standards, hypocrisy, unreality. The realism of his books is a protest against the false romanticism of such writers as Harrison Ainsworth, Bulwer Lytton, Disraeli, and even Dickens. His faulty human heroes are protests against the impossible heroes of romance. His stern unveiling of vice in all its hideousness, without any halo to dazzle and confuse our judgment, is a protest against the glorification of vice to which a certain class of novelist was prone. His books are full of a passionate desire for truth. He leaves specific reforms alone. The abuses which Dickens attacks are, in Thackeray's eyes, but the fruit of the evil : he directs his blows at the roots. His books are all written with a definite purpose—the exposure and ridicule of all

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affectation, pretension, falsehood—in a word, of all “snobbishness.” The Preface to the second edition of “Pendennis” is a kind of literary manifesto on his part. “I have no right to say to my readers, You shall not find fault with my art or fall asleep over my pages, but I ask you to believe that this person writing strives to tell the truth. If there is not that, there is nothing.”

It is this passion for truth that makes Thackeray stand supreme in characterization. Like Fielding, he shows us men and women as they really are, with all that capacity for good and evil that makes each human soul such a problem. He shows man as neither angel nor devil, but as the

“Strange counterpoise of heaven and earth,  
Majesty clothed with weakness, fragrant flower  
Running to poisonous seed, and seeming worth  
Cloaking corruption, creature of an hour

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Who never art so near to sin and shame  
As when thou hast achieved some deed of  
name."

He loves to dwell on the paradoxes and contradictions of human nature ; to show us (in the words of Tom Taylor's sympathetic appreciation)

" How e'en the best unto the worst is knit,  
By brotherhood of weakness, sin, and care ;  
How even in the worst, lamps may be lit  
To show all is not utter darkness there."

And consequently we feel sympathy for his characters that we can never extend to the paragons of the romantic school ; their faults, failures, struggles, and triumphs are so like our own, and teach lessons for which we look in vain to the impossible heroes of novelists of the preceding period.

He believes in human nature ; otherwise he could never have drawn such

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men as Major Dobbin, Colonel Newcome, Henry Esmond, Colonel Lambert, and the two George Warringtons, who balance the studies in various degrees of depravity that we find in Lord Steyne, old Crawley, Colonel Altamont, Sir Francis Clavering, Barnes Newcome, Barry Lyndon, and Mr. Charles Dence, in which last two characters he gives studies of vice, defence of which is difficult.

The test that he applies to his characters, by which they stand or fall, is their capacity for responding to spiritual promptings, and aspiring to a level higher than their own. Ethel Newcome ends by rising triumphantly above the worldly maxims of Lady Kew and her set. Rawdon Crawley responds to the "saddened purer feeling" awakened in his heart by love for his boy and contact (for the first time in his life) with a really good



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woman. Arthur Pendennis turns at last from the worldly counsels of the Major to the pure influence of his cousin and dead mother. Even little Harry Foker rises to dignity by virtue of his genuine and chivalrous love for Blanche Amory, while Barnes Newcome, Becky Crawley, Beatrix Esmond, all turn a deaf ear to any voice but that of self-interest, and, leaving the higher path, sink lower and lower in that slough of worldliness and materialism which Thackeray recognizes as the main source of evil in the world. They gain their world, but lose their own souls.

Indeed, he agrees with Browning in showing that love and truth are the only things worth striving after, that life is "just our chance o' the prize of learning love," and real victory lies, not in that which the world calls success, but in our holding

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“henceforth to the uttermost  
Such prize despite the envy of the world ;  
And having gained truth, keep truth—that is  
all.”

Thackeray's verdict on life is sad, but not hopeless. If he has neither the buoyant optimism of Dickens nor the deeper optimism of Browning, he is no pessimist. He recognizes evil rampant around us, but he recognizes no less the invincible power of goodness. He shows us the frivolity and worldliness of Tunbridge Wells when George III. was King ; but moving through society there is a family in which father, mother, and daughters frame their lives on a higher code than that accepted by the conventions of their day, and in which manly honour and womanly modesty were preserved untarnished. He paints the Courts of Queen Anne and the Pretender with all their corruption, but

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through the pages of "Esmond" pass the figures of an upright, honourable man and a gracious, pure-minded woman. We see Arthur Pendennis fought for, as it were, between his good and evil influences, and the victory lies with his mother, Laura, and George Warrington ; while Colonel Newcome carries with him a pure atmosphere of honour and singleness of heart wherever he goes. What more touching picture could we have of the far-reaching effects of unconscious goodness than Lady Jane Crawley's influence over her poor "world-battered" brother-in-law, or Laura Pendennis's work for that delightful old worldling, the Major ? What more vivid realization of the power of a purifying and sweetening influence in the midst of an evil world than the picture of the three generations joining in "that supplication—the strong man humbled by trial

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and grief, whose loyal heart was still full of love ; the child of that sweet age of those little ones whom the Blessed Speaker of the Prayer first bade to come to Him ; and the old man, whose heart was wellnigh as tender and as innocent, and whose day was approaching when he should be drawn to the Bosom of the Eternal Pity" ? One hesitates to draw such passages as this (and there are many of them) from their context—to do so seems almost a violation of Thackeray's own reverence and reticence in approaching such subjects, and yet it would be unpardonable to speak of his criticism of life without emphasizing its deeply religious basis. Gloomy though the outlook was, rampant though he saw evil to be, he shows us how the influence of good men and women, and the pure love of the family—of husband and wife, parent and child—stem the

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torrent of evil and keep the world habitable (and for the most perfect picture of family life we must turn to the Lamberts, in "The Virginians"). He indicates reverently, and with the greatest delicacy, the Source from which men derive the strength to battle with temptation, and the Power that is invoked by women whose prayers acted as a talisman over those they loved. He holds up before us a man like Colonel Lambert—a brave soldier, known and respected at Court and in his county, a "man of the world" in the best sense, and we feel no sense of incongruity when we find him assembling his family for prayers, or, in his anxiety and perplexity about his child, "as his custom not infrequently was, going into a church that was open for prayers, and there, on his knees, submitting his case in the quarter whither he frequently, though privately,

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came for guidance and comfort." He brings before us a soldier like Colonel Newcome, manly, chivalrous, brave, and before long his simple code of life is revealed. "'We must go and ask Barnes Newcome's pardon, sir, and forgive other people's trespasses if we would hope forgiveness of our own' His voice sank down as he spoke, and he bowed his honest head reverently." He cries "*Vanitas vanitatum!*" to those who are straining every faculty in the pursuit of temporal gain, and the persistence of his cry has earned him the name of cynic; but can one passage be quoted to show that Thackeray—speaking in his own person—ever expresses disbelief in the presence and power of goodness? ever sneers at truth, honour, or faithfulness? ever teaches that the world has been left to take care of itself? His lines printed at the end of "Dr. Birch and

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his Little Friends" answer for him. Three verses will show his philosophy of life, and his recognition of an overruling Power, in spite of the problems and enigmas of life.

" And in the world as in the school  
I'd say how fate may change and shift—  
The prize be sometimes with the fool,  
The race not always with the swift.  
The strong may yield, the good may fall,  
The great man be a vulgar clown,  
The knave be lifted over all,  
The poor cast pitilessly down.

" This crowns his feast with wine and wit.  
Who brought him to that mirth and state?  
His betters see below him sit,  
Or hunger hopeless at his gate.  
Who bade the mud from Dives' wheel  
To spurn the rays of Lazarus?  
Come, brother, in that dust we'll kneel,  
Confessing Heaven that ruled it thus.

" Come wealth or want, come good or ill,  
Let young and old accept their part,  
And bow before the Awful Will,  
And bear it with an honest heart

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Who misses or who wins the prize.  
Go lose or conquer as you can,  
But if you fall or if you rise,  
Be each, pray God, a gentleman."

Here is Thackeray's criticism of life at its best. We see his sadness of outlook, showing,

"As he removes his mask,  
A face that's anything but gay."

We see his frank recognition of the "topsy-turveydom of this life," where truth and sincerity so often seem powerless against cunning and deceit; but we see also the teaching that he maintains so faithfully and consistently throughout his works—that, after all, worldly success counts for little; that "man is a living spirit," able to rise above temporal conditions, and able to co-operate with the rulings of "the Awful Will" of the Master who is working out ends which



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as yet our human minds cannot grasp. He may not rise to Browning's jubilant cry, "God's in His heaven, all's right with the world," but he rises fully to the more soberly expressed faith of "In Memoriam."

"And all is well, tho' faith and form  
Be sundered in the night of fear ;  
Well roars the storm to those that hear  
A deeper Voice across the storm."

## “THE BOOK OF SNOBS”

JUST as the “Sketches by Boz” present in the germ those qualities which, when matured, made Dickens one of the foremost novelists of his generation, so in “The Book of Snobs” we find the foreshadowing of most of the characteristics which gained for Thackeray the unique position that he holds in English literature.

Whether or not the writer invented the word “snob” (which, by the way, has no place in Johnson’s “Dixionary”), he has given it a permanent position in the language, and reduced snob-hunting to a science. The whole of the treatise is an original conception, brilliantly

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carried out. The treatment is peculiarly characteristic of Thackeray: the mock-heroic opening ; the comparison of himself—the man marked out by destiny as the “ Snobographer ”—with others of historic fame raised up at a critical epoch to perform some specific service to humanity—Robespierre, the instrument of the French Revolution ; Washington, the instrument by whom America won her independence ; and—Professor Holloway “ who, when the Earl of Aldborough was unwell, appeared with his pills, and cured his lordship.” The extravagant use of capital letters to impress the reader with the solemnity of the undertaking, as he tells how the conviction that his great work had to be written “ Dogged me in the Busy Street ; Seated Itself By Me in the Lonely Study ; jogged my Elbow as It Lifted the Wine cup At the Festal

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Board ; Nestles in my Nightcap, and It Whispers, 'Wake Slumberer, Thy Work Is Not Yet Done.' The mock solemnity of the statement of the steps by which society was prepared for the stupendous work : "First the world was made—then, as a matter of course, Snobs," who, however, existed unrecognized till "*Punch* appeared at a ripe season to chronicle their history ; and the Individual comes forth to write the history in *Punch*." Thus he introduces his subject, arresting our attention and keeping us on the *qui vive* to know what is coming next ; affording, by the combination of pure fun and the most delicate satire, the key to the whole book.

But if the conception and treatment of the subject are brilliantly original, it is not for that quality especially that the book is so remarkable. It owes its posi-

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tion in literature to the satire underlying every page—not the coarse, savage satire of Swift, nor the spiteful, vindictive satire of Pope, but something more akin to that of Erasmus in his historic treatise “In Praise of Folly,” stinging mercilessly wherever the lash falls, and yet delicate, subtle, even playful, inspired, not by misanthropy, nor by wounded vanity, but by that large humanity so conspicuous in the Oxford Reformers of the sixteenth century, which hates and resents social shams, the imposition of false coin for true metal, or the blind acceptance of mere conventionality as the standard of conduct. The satire is so subtle that one dares not skim the pages, for fear of missing some delicate stab at the evil challenged—for Thackeray does not fight with the bludgeon, but with the rapier, and deals his wounds with an almost imperceptible turn of the

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wrist. Take, for instance, the description of the way in which he cut Marrowfat for eating peas with his knife : “ Everybody at Naples remarked the separation of the Damon and Pythias — indeed, Marrowfat had saved my life more than once — but, *as an English gentleman, what was I to do ?*” (Chapter II.). Indeed, it is worth noting what it is that excites his indignation and bitterness most, as indicating his attitude towards society. The false pride in some mere accident of birth, wealth, or social position, entirely apart from personal worth ; the truckling to others because they possess some such chance advantage ; all pretentious efforts to keep up appearances of greater fortune or position than are really ours ; all shams, religious, social, or domestic — these are the meannesses which he scourges so remorselessly, as eating

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away the heart of society in all grades, from "the Duchess of Fitzbattleaxe," who looks down on her neighbour "Lady Cræsus," to "Mrs. Letsam," the landlady, who grudges "Sukey, the maid, flowers under her bonnet like a lady." And special flagellation is reserved for one or two institutions which may be regarded as peculiarly responsible for the growth and development of snob-bishness—promotion by purchase (now happily abolished in the army); the toadyism formerly shown to noblemen at the Universities; Court journalism; and "Fat Prince Florizel."

Besides its originality and brilliant satire, "The Book of Snobs" is distinguished by specimens of that wonderful characterization of which Thackeray was such a master. No novelist has had a greater power of making his *dramatis personæ* at once typical and

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individual, or of defining a man or woman clearly and delicately by a few skilful strokes. Every "snob" presented to us is alive — no automaton, no embodiment of one sole idea or passion, but a human being, with all the capacities for good and evil that are latent in everyone. The whole treatise occupies less than 200 pages, yet in that comparatively small space the writer has given us a quite unique gallery of types — not one showing careless work, but each one drawn with a master's hand. The Pontos, Miss Wirt, Sackville Maine and his exquisitely sketched wife; Raymond Gray and his delightful "Fanny"; Wiggle, Waggle, Jawkins, Captain Shindy-Crump (in whom the Master of Trinity of Thackeray's year is thinly disguised), Raff, Tufto, Ragg and Famish, the De Moggins and Lord Brandyball — these are a few only of



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the characters that foreshadow those wonderful creations that have now come to make part of our lives ; for to some of us, at least, Thackeray's characters have a reality, one might almost say a personal influence, whether as example or warning, such as is shared by the characters of no other writer, and may claim to have played a part in the mental and moral development of not a few of the present generation.

It is a short step from the characters to the names by which they are known. Thackeray's nomenclature is no less representative of the writer's bent of mind than is that of Dickens. While the latter looked out for something characteristic, but absurd and grotesque, the former generally has some keen satire hidden in the names he uses — Tom Tufto ; Sir Alured Mogyns Smith de Mogyns, descendant of the Princes of

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Pontydwldm; the Rev. T. d'Arcy Sniffle.

• We find, too, in "The Book of Snobs" the practice in which Thackeray indulges (sometimes to weariness) in his later books of taking some trivial object for a name, and building up an aristocratic family with all its ramifications upon it. Thus, Lord Brandyball's surname is "Toffy," his eldest son "Lord Alicompagne"; the founder of the Carabas family was "Sir Andrew Katz." This mock-heroic treatment of the titles and grades of nobility is eminently characteristic of "The Book of Snobs" and of Thackeray's attitude towards the whole subject. We are familiar with it in "The Newcomes," where we meet the family of Pulleyns, the head of whom is Lord Dorking, whose estate is known as Chanticleer. Compared with this, the satire of such a name as "Verisopht" is clumsy indeed.

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Another characteristic point in "The Book of Snobs" is the strong personal note running through it, as through all Thackeray's work. He never hides himself behind his own characters, never writes down to us from a pedestal. He includes himself in the category of snobs with a delightful frankness; brings himself down to our own level, takes us into his confidence. It is all part of the satire: it is all meant to bear out his contention that snobbishness is coextensive with humanity—that if the writer is a man, he must therefore be "a snob, and a brother"; but, apart from the piquancy that it adds to the satire, it gives a delightful freshness and spontaneity to the book, that is peculiar to Thackeray.

Satirical though the work is, it is neither petty nor spiteful. It does not come from the pen of a misanthrope

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who gloats over human meanness and infirmity ; but from that of a humanitarian who resents the blows that he reveals, and gladly turns from them to the contemplation of the better side of his fellows. If there are outbursts of denunciation, there are also outbursts of generous appreciation. Take, for instance, such passages as that at the close of Chapter X. (Military Snobs) : “ Let those civilians who sneer at the acquirements of the Army read Sir Harry Smith’s account of the Battle of Aliwal. A noble deed was never told in nobler language. And you, who doubt if chivalry exists, or the age of heroism has passed by, think of Sir Henry Hardinge, with his son—‘ dear little Authur ’—riding in front of the line at Ferozeshah. I hope no English painter will endeavour to illustrate that scene, for who is there to do justice to

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it? The history of the world contains no more brilliant or heroic picture. No, no; the men who perform these deeds with such brilliant valour, and describe them with such modest manliness—SUCH are not snobs. Their Country admires them, their Sovereign rewards them, and Punch, the universal railer, takes off his hat, and says, ‘Heaven save them!’ ”

No paper on “The Characteristics of ‘The Book of Snobs’ ” could be regarded as even approximately adequate that did not take into account this side of Thackeray’s writings, to which so little justice is done by those who are content to dismiss him airily as a “cynic.” Cynical at times he undoubtedly is, in a limited sense of the word. He “barks” loudly and persistently at certain vices, meannesses, and follies, with which society is infected. He strips off dis-

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guises, pretences, hypocrisies, remorselessly. It is his

“To track the serpent’s trail with saddened eye;  
To mark how good and ill divide the heart,  
How lives in chequered shade and sunshine  
lie.”

But through “The Book of Snobs,” as through all his work, we must, if we are honest, and unless we have been carried away by the parrot cry of “Cynic!” recognize Thackeray’s love and reverence for heroism, self-sacrifice, and goodness. If he shows us a very seamy side of society, he also gives us glimpses of quiet domestic happiness, as in the charming little vignette of the Raymond Grays. If the chapter on “Club Snobs” leaves us with the uneasy feeling that the world is given over to selfishness, he hastens to turn our eyes to a very different picture—that of poor little Mrs. Sackville

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Maine, her children at her knee, teaching them to pray "God bless papa," lifting us, as he loves to do at rare intervals, into the purer atmosphere of those "places where he (Punch) acknowledges himself not privileged to make a noise, but puts away his show, and silences his drum, and takes off his hat, and holds his peace" (Chapter XI.).

"The Book of Snobs" is worthy of its author—one can pay it no higher tribute. It bears out every word of the paragraph that appeared in *Punch* of January 2, 1864, by one who knew him as author and as man. It illustrates at once "the brilliancy of his trained intellect, the terrible strength of his satire, the subtlety of his wit, the richness of his humour, and the catholic range of his calm wisdom"; it also reveals to those who are willing to trace it (for Thackeray was not one to parade

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his feelings) "the affectionate nature, the cheerful companionship, the large heart and open hand, the simple courteousness, and the endearing frankness, of a brave, true, honest gentleman, whom no pen but his own could depict as those who knew him would desire.'

THE END





